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ABSTRACT

Assessment of undergraduate student learning is discussed by a representative of the College Entrance Examination Board in testimony to the National Governors' Association. Governors are advised to avoid externally-mandated assessment requirements on colleges, since there is no single instrument available to effectively assess academic achievement across all colleges. Most current assessment instruments are designed to determine what individual students have learned. Assessment comes from four sources (the professor, department, college, or an external agency). Assessment is often administered at college entry, midway through college, and at graduation. The College Board offers a number of assessment instruments that assist colleges in the placement of entering students. Two assessment tools developed jointly with the Educational Testing Service focus on an individual student's ability level and provide information to assist in the instructional process. For rising juniors or transfer students, the assessment instruments focus more on general education and subject matter knowledge. Student performance on admissions tests should not be used to evaluate the quality of high school or undergraduate programs. (SW)

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[Testimony Before the National Governor's Association Task Force on College Quality (Washington, D.C. February 22, 1986)]

George H. Hanford

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Governor Ashcroft, I want to thank you and members of your panel for giving me this opportunity to appear before the College Quality Task Force of the National Governors' Association. The work of this task force--and the others associated with the "1991" report--are important steps in an effort to renew quality education for all American students. I am pleased--and honored--to be able to work with you on achieving this goal and to share in your commitment to the task ahead.

You asked me to address three specific questions: "Is it possible to assess undergraduate student learning?" "Do adequate instruments currently exist for conducting this assessment?" And, "What is the effect of college-level assessment on minority students?"

Let me start by dealing with the first two questions together first and do so with the observation that there are two possible meanings to the phrase "assessment of undergraduate learning"...meanings that depend on whether the purpose of the assessment is to determine what a student has learned or to assess the quality of education an institution provides. These two quite separate purposes frequently get confused in any discussion of assessment... confused in part because test scores or examination results obtained by students are sometimes aggregated or interpreted in ways used to evaluate the institution they attend...not, please keep in mind, the purpose those instruments are intended to serve.

I should also note that most assessment that takes place in higher education comes from four sources (the professor, the department, the institution, or some external agency) and in two kinds (written and multiple choice). Externally

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Testimony prepared for delivery before the National Governors' Association Task Force on College Quality, Washington, D.C., February 22, 1986, by George H. Hanford, President, The College Board.

developed instruments are usually multiple-choice ones normed against a presumably comparable (to the students being tested) population. I assume your first two questions are intended to deal with externally developed instruments that can serve to assess either individuals or institutions or both. In that case, the answer to your first question is "In part, yes!"; and I say in part because there are many desirable outcomes of higher education, particularly non-academic ones that are not susceptible to scientific measurement. And the answer to your second question is "I don't know" and I won't until I know what aspects of higher education are to be assessed.

Before explaining those answers, however, I want to enter a demurrer. It is that, while I am generally familiar with tests used for undergraduate assessment sponsored by other agencies such as the American College Testing Program and Educational Testing Service, my firsthand experience is with the instruments offered by the College Board and my comments will be based on that experience. I also serve as a Trustee of Edison State College, New Jersey's non-traditional institution that offers no courses itself but awards credits and degrees through a variety of methods...by transfer credit; by examination, instruments both internally and externally developed; and by portfolio. My observations are also influenced by that association.

I would ask now that you keep in mind not only the confusion I noted at the outset but also my assumption and my demurrer as I turn to a description of some of the externally developed instruments currently available for the assessment of learning in higher education.

Such assessment, of the kind I assume you are interested in, is typically administered on three occasions during a student's collegiate years:

1. at entry, to assist with course placement and remediation decisions, and as a baseline for later "value added" analyses;
2. at midpoint, or "rising junior" level, for entry to upper division, for transfer from a two- to four-year institution, and for final determination of major or program of study; and
3. at graduation, for establishing a minimum standard for receipt of a baccalaureate degree and for completing the "value added" calculation initiated at entry.

At each of these points, different types of learning can be assessed including: basic competencies in reading, writing and mathematics; cognitive development or higher order thinking and reasoning skills; general education; and finally knowledge in specific subject matter fields.

It is at the entry level that the widest spectrum of assessment instruments exists. At the College Board, for instance, we offer the Scholastic Aptitude Test, an assessment of higher order verbal and mathematical reasoning skills; Achievement Tests in 13 subjects; the Degrees of Reading Power, which measures the difficulty of prose a student can handle; the Multiple Assessment Programs and Services (MAPS), which includes the verbal and mathematical components of the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test as well as an instrument to assess ability in English as a second language. We have recently developed batteries of MAPS tests to meet the differing needs of entering students in Florida, Tennessee, and at the California community colleges. These instruments assist colleges in determining whether entering students should be placed in regular, remedial, or advanced courses, with the need for remediation normally

identified through skills or competency testing and advanced placement usually made on the basis of performance on subject matter achievement tests.

Our experience with the NJCBSPT illustrates how this particular battery can be used effectively to identify students in need of remediation upon college entry. Early identification of needs and the resultant institutional remedial efforts substantially improve students' chances of academic success, and thereby serve to reduce dropout rates.

Accordingly, our efforts to develop new assessment tools continue, specifically in the form of a joint venture with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) which applies advanced computer technology to the assessment process. Two products of that venture, a Computerized Adaptive Test in college basic skills and a Diagnostic Testing Project, have strong instructional components and are suitable for use at the college entry level. These new tests rapidly tailor questions during an actual test administration to focus in on an individual student's ability level, permit immediate reporting of test results, and provide descriptions of the student's strengths and weaknesses to assist in the instructional process.

To recapitulate, there are a variety of assessment instruments available at the college entry level...instruments which measure either basic academic competencies or subject matter knowledge, can be used to place students in appropriate courses...remedial, regular, or advanced...and which can provide a baseline for "value-added analyses." These analyses are important if "accountability" is taken to mean how much a student learns during the course of his or her higher education.

Quite a different mix of instruments is currently available for use at the rising junior level after two years of college. Used to qualify for entry to

upper division work or as a basis for transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution, these instruments are focused more on general education and specific subject matter knowledge and less on academic skills or competencies. The College-Level Examination Program of the College Board with 42 subject-matter specific examinations in 37 subjects, plus general examinations in the Humanities, English Composition, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences and History, and the Proficiency Examination Program of the American College Testing Program offer such examinations; but, it should be noted, they have been used primarily to award credit to adult learners for non-traditional, off-campus study.

Recognizing the growing interest on the part of institutions in the further development of instruments for use at the end of what is in effect the fourteenth grade, the College Board, Educational Testing Service, and the American College Testing Program are currently exploring ways to respond. For example, we are currently working with the Maryland Board of Higher Education in developing a plan for the short term implementation of the end of sophomore year academic outcomes assessment process. This initiative will allow an individual institution to address its special educational needs, over time.

To summarize, at the "rising junior" level, there are a number of subject matter assessment instruments available and more are in the works.

At the exit, graduation, or baccalaureate level quite a different set of examinations is available, most of them, however, in the form of entrance examinations to the graduate level or to the professions. I am speaking here of such instruments as the Graduate Record Examination, the Graduate Management Admissions Test, the Law School Admissions Test, the National Teacher Examination, the Medical College Admissions Test, licensure tests for nursing or

engineering, and so on. Student performances on these tests are sometimes misused to evaluate the quality of undergraduate programs just as SAT scores are sometimes misused to evaluate the quality of secondary schools. To the best of my knowledge, there are no examinations specifically designed to assess what has happened to the basic academic competencies of college graduates during their undergraduate years...their abilities to communicate, deal with numbers, and reason. Nor is there any ready-made way to assess what value has been added in terms of subject matter knowledge because the exit (or entrance to graduate study) examinations are not tied directly to the assessment instruments at the point of entry.

Here the problem of assessment of undergraduate student learning begins to get really complicated. First of all, there is the confusion I noted at the outset between assessment of individuals and assessment of institutions. The assessment instruments I have mentioned thus far are ones designed for use with individuals. I should note, however, that to my knowledge there are at least two batteries designed to help colleges and universities assess the quality of their performances...the Undergraduate Assessment Program of Educational Testing Service and the College Outcome Measures Program of the American College Testing Program.

And second, there is the confusion between competencies and knowledge.

But whether one is trying to assess institutions or students, competencies or knowledge, the complexity I have in mind exists. Most students don't study, say, anthropology, in secondary school. But some do in college. How does one determine what is the right amount of anthropological value to be added...for a student who takes one course in it, or one who majors in it... and how does one compare the value added in anthropology to that added in

engineering or in Russian or in nursing? My own sense is that these are not the questions that those who want to see greater accountability in higher education are asking. Instead they are responding to complaints of businessmen who have to teach college graduates how to read or liberal arts graduate professors who inherit bachelor's degree holders who can't write or graduate engineering faculties facing students underprepared in math. They are interested in both competencies and knowledge.

It is in the midst of this complexity that I perceive two real dangers. First, the current national interest in reforming higher education comes in the aftermath of far-ranging efforts at the elementary and secondary school levels. The danger is that policy makers will apply the same set of principles and practices to higher education reform as they have adopted for primary and secondary education. The purposes of school and college education differ dramatically. Secondary education is common and compulsory. Higher education is diverse and by choice. The failure to recognize this difference could, by forcing colleges and universities into a more common academic mold, have the effect of eroding one of the major strengths and globally unique aspects of American higher education...its diversity. Second, there is the danger of overreliance on test scores. For instance, they should not, in my judgment, be used as the only criterion for deciding whether a student should be admitted to upper division study, any more than SAT scores should be used alone in deciding which students should be admitted to college. There are other measures of academic success and promise, particularly course grades. And, as I suggested at the beginning of these remarks, there are many desirable, non-academic outcomes of higher education that are not subject to scientific measurement.

It is because of the existence of those two dangers that I urge the members of this task force to move cautiously in their consideration of assessment in undergraduate education. Assessment, wisely conceived and sensitively used, can help to achieve meaningful reform in higher education. But assessment, poorly conceived and grossly used without regard for the fundamental nature of higher education, could undermine its foundations and ultimately lead to disaster.

Given the complexities that arise from the diversity of the higher education enterprise and the variety of subjects available for study, it is my judgment that the role of test sponsors like the College Board should be to develop a comprehensive set of assessment instruments...a menu, if you will, from which individual colleges and universities...and individual higher education state systems...can choose and then use to demonstrate to the public and to public authority, each in its own way, that value is being added, that they are being accountable, and that the public is getting its money's worth.

The third question you asked me to address is: "What is the effect of college-level assessment on minority students?" I assume that the question is asked at least in part in response to the erroneous charge that standardized tests like the SAT are biased against minority students. Let me say at the outset in dealing with this question that it is not the test that is biased but an educational system that fails adequately to prepare students for college study.

Having made that assertion I would also assert that the major challenge facing higher education is to insure access for as many students as possible, including those who may have deficiencies in their precollege education, and

at the same time maintain standards of academic excellence. I believe it can be done.

Recently the College Board's Advisory Panel on Minority Concerns discussed at length the question you have posed and urged the College Board to venture cautiously in broadening availability of college-level assessment tools. The panel, consisting of educators and educational administrators from schools and colleges across the country, endorsed the continuing use of placement and diagnostic tests in college but expressed deep concern over the effects of "rising junior" and "college exit" tests on minority students. What they were saying, in terms of my earlier testimony on the first two questions, is that assessment imposed at the midpoint or at exit without attention to...and remediation of...the deficiencies noted in assessment at entry would be unfair. Because minority students suffer disproportionately from inadequate secondary schooling, the imposition of such tests would have a disproportionately harmful effect on their opportunities for higher education.

A final word: As you continue to examine policy options regarding college quality, I urge your task force to avoid placing excessive externally mandated assessment requirements on institutions of higher education and their students. I trust that the governors' goal is to encourage institutions to embark upon assessment themselves, rather than to mandate it from above. As institutions seek to be accountable academically, I ask you to keep in mind that there is no single instrument available to assess effectively academic achievement across all institutions. As I have said, there is a need for a variety of assessment tools appropriate to different institutions with different missions, student bodies and academic standards.

Thank you again for the opportunity to meet with you. I look forward to working with you on the important tasks ahead.

I would be pleased to respond to your questions.